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Introduction: Curating Feeling

Victoria Mills

I am [. . .] wholly unable to surport myself and child and hopes that you will take this to your feeling consideration.¹

A mother stands alone in front of the all-male committee of the Foundling Hospital in London. She is attending an interview as part of the lengthy bureaucratic process involved in admitting illegitimate babies to the hospital during the mid-nineteenth century. She attempts to persuade the committee that she is a good candidate for help. She needs to convince the hospital to take her child because she is unable to provide it with the necessary support for life. She is desperate. The gentlemen of the committee fire numerous questions at the young woman, questions about her relationship with the father of her child, her sexual history, her character, and the details and circumstances of her 'seduction' (the term used to describe both consenting and non-consenting sexual intercourse). The mother's words are recorded by a secretary on sheets of paper and filed with other documents relating to her application: letters of reference from employers (black-edged, they symbolize mourning for the loss of the woman's character), communications from lying-in hospitals, documents from the workhouse, as well as the petition form that all mothers were required to complete at the start of the application process.

The words quoted above are those of Ann Gidding who applied (unsuccessfully) to have her baby accepted by the hospital in 1831 (*Fig. 1*). She approached the hospital, like so many in her condition, in the hope that it would accept her child and thus enable her to resume her place in society, relieved of the stigma attached to the figure of the unmarried mother. There were strict criteria for admission to the hospital. A mother had to prove that there was no ongoing contact with the father. If the sexual relationship had been consenting it was important to argue that marriage had been promised or, if not, that the mother had been forced into sexual activity against her will. Ann's plea written on her petition form in which she entreats the hospital to give her case 'feeling consideration' is

¹ London Metropolitan Archives, Foundling Hospital Collection, A/FH/o8/1/3/38/1 (1831).

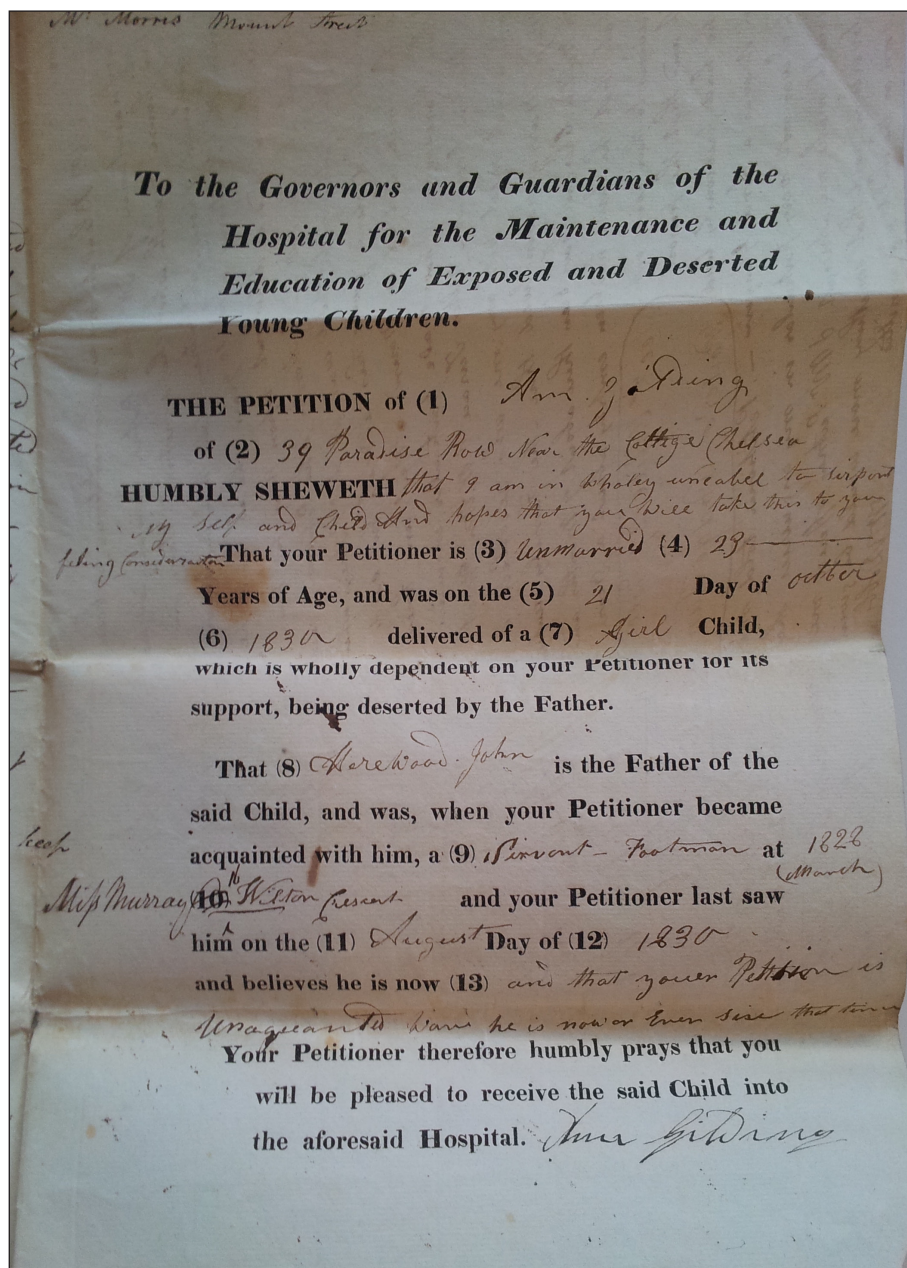


Fig. 1: Ann Gidding's rejected petition, 1831, London Metropolitan Archives.
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an appeal to the emotions which cuts through the bureaucratic process, reminding us of what was at stake for these women. Acceptance or rejection by the hospital could mean the difference between life and death for both mother and child. Sarah Farquhar made a similar appeal in her letters to John Brownlow, the hospital secretary, in 1854:

If I expose the matter to my friends I am disgraced forever,
never can I enter home again and all friends will shun me. It
is in this extremity that I thought of your institution [. . .].
My only hope is in concealment.

Sarah describes how her situation led her to consider suicide and continues: 'This is my only hope and the only effort I can make. If I do not succeed I must give up all in despair.'²

The statements of Sarah, Ann, and hundreds of other women can be read in the Foundling Hospital collection in London's Metropolitan Archives. This archive constitutes a remarkable repository of emotion. In 2015 a selection of documents from the archive formed part of an exhibition on the 'Fallen Woman' curated by Lynda Nead at the Foundling Museum. Art, emotion, and archival material came together with petition forms and letters exhibited alongside Victorian paintings depicting images of both ideal and fallen women.³ The juxtaposition of paintings with historical documents raises questions about the function of medium specificity in the production and representation of affect (discussed in this issue by Tim Barringer, Kate Flint, and Karen Burns) and thus the range of methodological approaches required to address the study of Victorian emotion. Through these diverse objects, the 'Fallen Woman' exhibition presented the experience of mid-Victorian foundling mothers and tasked itself with the process of curating feeling.⁴

The affective turn in museum studies has generated a significant body of work in which affect theory is used to analyse exhibitions and displays. Studies of museological affect focus on diverse aspects of the museum experience including architecture, space, online interfaces, and installations, as well as the curated objects themselves. Much of this work argues that the affective response of audiences works against the authority of museums and heritage sites, disrupting the model of the visitor as a

² LMA, Foundling Hospital Collection, A/FH/A/o8 (1854).

³ For example, George Elgar Hicks's *The Happy Mother* (1866), Carlos Cope's *Mother and Child* (1852), Richard Redgrave's *The Outcast* (1851), and Frederick Walker's *The Lost Path* (1863).

⁴ This is the focus of a work-in-progress article, 'Curating Feeling: Art, Emotion, and the Archive', by me which explores the 'Fallen Woman' exhibition, among others, as a form of critical (art) history practice and considers how it might intervene in the field of Victorian affect studies.

passive consumer of meaning. Authors point to disconnection between the occurrence of cognition and meaning-making in response to the production of curatorial narratives and the ‘feeling of exhibitions’ which may precede it.⁵

While different aspects of the museum experience produce a range of affects, visitor response to the ‘Fallen Woman’ exhibition was also shaped by the emotional subject matter of the display itself. The testimony of foundling mothers in the archive documents is both moving and disturbing. There are myriad examples of women being lured into houses by strangers or casual acquaintances and forced to engage in sexual activity against their will. Some were given drink, often brandy, before the attacks took place. The petitions contain disturbing accounts of such experiences. For example, Diana Saturn, who petitioned the hospital in 1830, was told by her attacker that ‘if she screamed [. . .] no one would come in her assistance’.⁶ As unique records of nineteenth-century traumatic experience, the petitions constitute a way of combatting trauma’s ephemerality, the sense that it is unrepresentable and untraceable.

With this comes significant responsibility. How can we bear witness to historical emotion — to the feelings of people in the past — and what problems do they pose for historicization? While many recent studies call for due attention to the historical specificity of emotion, others argue the case for approaching historical emotion in a way that collapses time.⁷ The Victorians themselves were willing to entertain such a move. Looking back to a remote era, Edward Bulwer-Lytton writes in his 1834 novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* that ‘THE AFFECTIONS ARE IMMORTAL! — they are the sympathies which unite the ceaseless generations. The past lives again, when we look upon its emotions — It lives in our own! That which was, ever is!’.⁸ In Bulwer’s novel, a model of positivist historicism (the painstaking reconstruction of Pompeii based on editions of William Gell’s *Pompeiana* (1817–18; 1824; 1832)) shares discursive space with an emphasis on the relevance and resonance of antique emotion for a modern audience.

While current debates in Victorian studies address the challenges and opportunities of presentism as a mode of historical enquiry, being presentist is, in fact, a necessary condition of curating, of packaging the

⁵ Jennifer Fisher and Helena Reckitt, ‘Introduction: Museums and Affect’, *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, 4 (2015), 361–62 (p. 361).

⁶ LMA, Foundling Hospital Collection, A/FH/A08/001/002/039/01 (1830).

⁷ See, for examples of each, work by Richard Higgins and Adela Pinch in ‘Victorian Emotions’, ed. by Rachel Ablow, *Victorian Studies*, 50.3 (2008); and Nicola Bown, ‘Tender Beauty: Victorian Painting and the Problem of Sentimentality’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 16 (2011), 214–25.

⁸ Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (London: Bentley, 1834), p. 24.

nineteenth century for a contemporary audience.⁹ This is particularly evident where exhibitions deal with the contemporary resonance of nineteenth-century feeling. Any objects selected to produce an emotional response in a modern audience draw attention to the curatorial strategies involved in the mediation of affect. They also highlight the capacity of such objects to foster a sense of vital connection, a presentness crucial for visitor engagement. The paintings, letters, and petitions in the ‘Fallen Woman’ exhibition stimulated an immediate bond with the past, suggesting to the visitor that she is linked to history by commonality of feeling, not alienated from it by a propensity to feel differently. Sentimental painting, like Philip Calderon’s *Broken Vows* (1856), the cover image of this issue, has a similar ability to suggest connection across time, nurturing a transhistorical sense of emotional community. Like many of the foundling mothers, the woman in this painting has been rejected by a former lover. Viewing Victorian sentimental art and engaging with emotive objects demands consideration of the emotional pull they had for both Victorian and contemporary audiences (Bown, p. 225). The process of curating feeling weaves together these strands, thinks about how to care for past emotion, and manages the way it carries through into the present.¹⁰

A 2015 conference on ‘The Arts and Feeling in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture’ organized by me for the Birkbeck Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies had its roots in the archival research I undertook for two exhibitions: the ‘Fallen Woman’ exhibition discussed above and the 2012 ‘Victorian Sentimentality’ display I co-curated with Nicola Bown and Alison Smith at Tate Britain. The conference began with a panel on ‘Curating Feeling’ in which Alison Smith, Michael Hatt, Lynda Nead, and I discussed questions relating to our own experience of curating emotive objects.¹¹ The conference papers that followed examined a range of nineteenth-century cultural production, reflecting the way in which the study of Victorian emotion lends itself so readily to interdisciplinary enquiry. This issue of *19* reflects that rich diversity. Music, sculpture, and painting are all represented, but also Victorian novels, poetry, art criticism, exhibition culture, and architecture. Objects of scrutiny range from the design of the colonial penitentiary to the late-Victorian painting of a

⁹ Anna Kornbluh and Benjamin Morgan, ‘Introduction: Presentism, Form, and the Future of History’, *b20* (October 2016) <<http://www.boundary2.org/2016/10/anna-kornbluh-and-benjamin-morgan-introduction-presentism-form-and-the-future-of-history/>> [accessed 1 December 2016].

¹⁰ There is a particular responsibility involved in curating difficult knowledge such as the foundling mothers’ experience of sexual violence. See Jennifer Bonnell and Roger I. Simon, “Difficult” Exhibitions and Intimate Encounters’, *Museum and Society*, 5 (2007), 65–85.

¹¹ A recording of this panel discussion is available at <<https://birkbeck.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Embed.aspx?id=20967cea-83dd-43f9-8192-37f9db4a443>> [accessed 1 December 2016].

martyrdom as authors foreground a variety of different things. Through them, these articles can interrogate the expressive codes and conventions that were familiar to the Victorians as well as bringing focus to the terminology used today in academic discourse to locate, recognize, and describe feeling.

Victorian emotion has always proved a popular area of study but the current affective turn in the arts and humanities has produced a range of influential new work. The historian Thomas Dixon, for example, pays particular attention to emotion as a psychological category that developed in the nineteenth century; while literary critic Rachel Ablow's 2008 special edition of *Victorian Studies* highlights the ways in which the emotions functioned as a key epistemological tool throughout the Victorian period. Sentimentality has proved a ripe area of recent scholarship. Both *19*'s 'Rethinking Victorian Sentimentality' (2007) and the *Journal of Victorian Culture*'s 'New Agenda: Sentimentalities' (2011) tackle sentimentality as a much-maligned mode of feeling but one that is central to an understanding of the Victorian period. 'The Arts and Feeling' builds on such work, and on more recent issues of *19*, especially 'The Victorian Tactile Imagination' (2014) and 'Victorian Sculpture' (2016), that similarly explore how Victorian arts, broadly conceived, both represent and provoke feeling.¹²

Kate Flint's article begins with a discussion of how to define feeling as distinct from those terms with which it is often interchanged: emotion and affect. Focusing on John Everett Millais's *Autumn Leaves* (1856), her article pays attention to the historicization of feeling, eschewing an interpretation of the painting based on an abstract understanding of melancholy and loss in favour of a historicized reading, which provocatively places the painting in dialogue with the Crimean War. In the second part of her article, Flint turns to the question of medium specificity, reading photographic imagery of the Crimean War alongside *Autumn Leaves* and asking 'what, if anything, [is] distinct about the feelings produced by a painting and by a photograph?' How do each create emotional impact? Both Flint and Kate Nichols make strong arguments for understanding the historic specificity of both art and feeling. Nichols takes Edwin Long's 1881 painting *Diana or Christ?* as her object of study, a painting which caused

¹² Thomas Dixon, "'Emotion': The History of a Keyword in Crisis", *Emotion Review*, 4 (2012), 338–44, and 'The Tears of Mr Justice Willes', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17 (2012), 1–23; 'Victorian Emotions', ed. by Ablow; 'New Agenda: Sentimentalities', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 16 (2011), 187–274; 'Rethinking Victorian Sentimentality', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 4 (2007) <<http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/67/volume/o/issue/4/>>; 'The Victorian Tactile Imagination', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 19 (2014) <<http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/87/volume/o/issue/19/>>; 'Victorian Sculpture', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 22 (2016) <<http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/89/volume/2016/issue/22/>>.

disagreement among critics over its levels of emotional content. Nichols uses *Diana or Christ?* to examine ‘the role that the visual might play in the history of religious emotions and, in turn, to reflect on how attention to religious feeling might offer new perspectives on Victorian art’. Nichols takes a historicist approach based on the reception history of the painting but she is also interested in how chronological distinctions are collapsed through religious art’s ability to produce a transhistorical sense of Christian community, arguing that Long’s painting brought ‘pagan and Christian into intimate conversation in ways that defied but also reified chronology’.

In contrast to this emphasis on historicization, Sophie Ratcliffe’s article explores the limits of a historicist approach to emotion. Pairing Thomas Woolner’s 1862 sculpture *Constance and Arthur* with Robert Browning’s hastily written stanza ‘Deaf and Dumb Children’ published in the accompanying exhibition catalogue, Ratcliffe examines the idea of ‘feeling in a hurry’ and the impact of the art world’s commercial concerns on the viewer’s ability to see and feel art. Analysing her own, unhurried engagement with *Constance and Arthur*, Ratcliffe explores questions of ‘feeling in the present’, using contemporary disability studies to show how Victorian sculpture ‘evoke[s] relational feelings in the [tactile] moment’.

Tactility is also the theme of Lesa Scholl’s article, which traces the tactile quality of tasting in George Eliot’s *Mill on the Floss* (1860). Scholl argues for the importance of the connection between taste and touch ‘because tasting involves touching in a way that takes the tactile within one’s body, incorporating the tactile into one’s physiological being in a way that severely risks immoderation’. In contrast to readings that tether Maggie’s tragedy to her uncontrollable appetites, Scholl suggests that ‘it is at the moment when Maggie chooses to not eat — to not taste, to refrain, to repress her hunger — that her tragedy reaches the point of no return’. The pathos of Maggie’s fall, she argues, is rooted in an instance of self-denial which mirrors the unsatisfied hunger of her childhood.

The figure of the fallen woman also appears in Tim Barringer’s article which explores how two radically incompatible media, art and music, ‘coalesce around specific themes and preoccupations to represent, articulate, produce, or, indeed, repress feelings’. Examining work by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Frederic Leighton, and Aubrey Beardsley, Barringer interrogates the relationship between the claims of realism ‘in which the representation of emotions is achieved through narrative forms and close description of the material world’ and formalism ‘which claims that the manipulation of abstract structures in art or music can directly affect the emotional state of the viewer or reflect that of the creator’. One of Barringer’s case studies considers the musical elements evident in William Holman Hunt’s *Awakening Conscience* (1854): the sheet music visible on the piano, ‘Oft, in the stilly night’, by Thomas Moore, and

the design of the piano itself. As well as working didactically, the musical elements work diegetically ‘to evoke a powerful emotional reaction from the viewer whose sympathies are awakened by the painting, just as the conscience of the young woman is being awakened by the sound of music’. In an alternative reading of *The Awakening Conscience*, Barringer suggests that this artwork reinstates the association of music with sex in a way that exceeds the sweet nostalgic sentiments of ‘Oft, in the still night’. Instead, the ‘pleasures of music, the bodily vibrations which generate emotional states’ suggest an ‘equivalence between music and sexual desire — perhaps even sexual violence’. Barringer traces ‘the relationship between sexual desire and aesthetic pleasure at the point of intersection of art and music’.

Karen Burns’s article explores a range of Victorian material culture inspired by Christianity (paintings, church interiors, prison architecture) showing how artists and designers became newly attentive to the sensory capacities of their chosen media. Burns is interested in how art and material culture were understood by the Victorians as ‘sensory media for regenerating Christian feeling’. Burns also discusses Hunt’s *Awakening Conscience*: her emphasis being on the painting’s strategies for producing *devotional* affects in the viewer. As well as painting, Burns examines Augustus Welby Pugin’s Gothic church interiors and, finally, Victorian jails, showing how both architects and prison chaplains were keen to explore the ‘powerful sensory psychologies of environments as instruments of religious awakening’. ‘The sensory excess of Pugin’s church interiors’, argues Burns, ‘found their religious counterpart in the sensory deprivation of the penitentiary.’ From the prison to the asylum, Karen Stock examines the thirty-two watercolours depicting extreme emotional states painted by Richard Dadd while he was detained in the Bethlem asylum in the 1850s. Stock reads Dadd’s *Passions* series alongside Joanna Baillie’s concept of ‘sympathetic curiosity’, the compulsion to peer into another’s soul, which was developed in her 1789 *Plays on the Passions*. The way in which viewers respond to the *Passions*, argues Stock, was shaped by the ‘intersection of images, madness, and theatricality’.

Katherine Wheeler’s article returns us to the subject of emotional architecture. Wheeler examines the circulation of John Ruskin’s ideas about the emotional aspects of architectural experience within architectural circles across the nineteenth century. Charting Ruskin’s response to the professionalization of building design during the period, Wheeler explores how his views on architecture are rooted in the concept of architecture as the ‘product of a man’s own emotional input in his craft’. Ruskin’s insistence on the centrality of emotion for architectural practice was taken up by George Aitchison at the end of the century, as the latter worried that Victorian revivalism privileged details and ornament over the emotional power of a historic building. Both Ruskin’s and Aitchison’s

definition of architecture, argues Wheeler, depends on the assumption that it was ‘an emotional, even passionate, art’, and not a science.

Emotional response to architecture (along with landscapes and religious art) is also a component of Sarah Barnette’s article on Vernon Lee. Following a viewing of a Spanish cathedral during her tour of Tangier and southern Spain in 1888 and 1889, Lee began to formulate an aesthetic theory of ‘historic emotion’ produced by fusing together historic knowledge and affective response. This theory, combined with what Lee terms the ‘faculty of association’, provides a context for a reading of Lee’s only supernatural tale set in Spain, ‘The Virgin of the Seven Daggers’ (1896; 1909). Barnette argues that Lee uses this tale to work out her early views on ‘the limits, advantages, and disadvantages of our aesthetic facilities’. Lee spent her whole life looking at art, and women viewing art is the focus of Meaghan Clarke’s article, which takes the gendering of aesthetic response as its subject. Beginning with an analysis of the visual representation of female gallery visitors, Clarke examines the dichotomy between female sympathy for painting and the intellectual effort involved in viewing art. The second part of Clarke’s article reads the tempera revival in the late nineteenth century as ‘a locus for rethinking gendered aesthetic experience’. ‘Tempera’ (produced through the mixing of pigment and binder) and female ‘temperament’ coalesce in depictions of women’s aesthetic engagement. Focusing on the work respectively of art critic Alice Meynell and artist Marianne Stokes, Clarke asks whether the ‘revival of tempera instigate[d] a revival of “feeling” in art’.

In attending to the convergence of Victorian arts and emotions, the articles in this issue confront the stereotype of the Victorian stiff upper lip, of a nineteenth-century Britain, as Barringer puts it, ‘irredeemably repressed and unable to emote’. Instead, feeling is foregrounded as a crucial aspect of aesthetic response for the Victorians, mediated by the unique ontological status of a variety of art objects; shaped, but not confined, by its relationship to a particular historical moment.